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Why do Most Relationships Fail? – The Myth of the Magical Other

“...more people look for salvation through relationship than in houses of worship. One may even suggest that romantic love has replaced institutional religion as the greatest motive power and influence in our lives...the search for love has replaced the search for God.”

[James Hollis, *The Eden Project: In Search of the Magical Other*](#)

Half of all first marriages end in divorce; as do two-thirds of second marriages, and nearly three-quarters of third marriages. Most non-marital relationships also end in separation. Of the relationships that do last, many are unhealthy and unhappy. Most relationships, in other words, fail. In some cases it is infidelity, abuse, or a clash in personality, beliefs, values, or life-plans that causes a relationship to fail. Many times, however, it is the result of one, or both partners, burdening the relationship with the fantasy that it will cure all their personal problems. This belief that a romantic relationship will unlock a life of happiness and fulfillment, the psychiatrist M. Scott Peck called the myth of romantic love. And in this video, we explain how belief in this myth destroys one's capacity to cultivate the healthy and realistic love that sustains fulfilling relationships. For as M. Scott Peck writes:

“The myth of romantic love tells us that when we meet the person for whom we are intended...we will be able to satisfy all of each other's needs forever and ever, and therefore live happily forever after in perfect union and harmony...While I generally find that great myths are great precisely because they represent and embody great universal truths...the myth of romantic love is a dreadful lie...as a psychiatrist I weep in my heart almost daily for the ghastly confusion and suffering that this myth fosters.”

[M. Scott Peck, *The Road Less Traveled*](#)

The myth of romantic love is pervasive in popular culture; countless shows, movies, plays, books, and songs are centered around the theme of a lost and lonely individual who finds the perfect romantic match, and thereafter experiences a life of happiness and fulfillment. The psychologist James Hollis called this perfect romantic match the Magical Other. And he suggested that as traditional sources of meaning such as religion, family, and community have eroded, the pursuit of the Magical Other has intensified – as many people today deify romantic love and view it as the central source of life’s meaning. Or as Hollis wrote in *The Eden Project: The Search for the Magical Other*:

“One of the false ideas that drives humankind is the fantasy of the Magical Other, the notion that there is one person out there who is right for us...a soul-mate who will repair the ravages of our personal history; one who will be there for us, who will read our minds, know what we want and meet those deepest needs; a good parent who will protect us from suffering and, if we are lucky, spare us the perilous journey of individuation... Virtually all popular culture is fueled by...the search for the Magical Other.”

[*James Hollis, The Eden Project: In Search of the Magical Other*](#)

In addition to popular culture promoting the idea that a Magical Other can save one from suffering and make life meaningful, the search for the “Magical Other” often stems from a childhood lacking in sufficient parental love, affection, and attention. A child who does not receive steady and dependable caregiving tends to develop into an adult afflicted with feelings of insecurity, a fragile identity, and pervasive feelings of emptiness. Such an individual often attempts to fill the emotional void by anchoring their sense of self in a relationship, and by seeking a romantic partner who can assume the role of a maternal or paternal figure, or as Hollis writes:

“The search for reflection from the Magical Other is also the dynamic of narcissism, which manifests in the adult who as a child was insufficiently mirrored by a loving, affirmative parent.”

[*James Hollis, The Eden Project: In Search of the Magical Other*](#)

In the early stages of a relationship, it can appear as if one has found their Magical Other. With dopamine and oxytocin flooding the brain, and with evolved mating instincts playing tricks on the mind so as to increase the probability of reproducing, the experience of falling in love is rife with illusions – the primary of which is the idealization of the significant other. The faults and flaws of the partner are ignored or glossed over as eccentricities which only add to their charm. The novelty of the other, coupled with their perceived perfection, engenders deep feelings of infatuation, happiness, and euphoria, which can breed the illusion that life is now complete. Furthermore, one’s ego boundaries collapse as one psychologically merges with the partner, just as in early infancy one was psychologically merged with the mother. “*In some respects the act of falling in love is an act of regression.*”, observed James Hollis. Or as the M. Scott Peck wrote regarding this experience:

“The unreality of these feelings when we have fallen in love is essentially the same as the unreality of the two-year-old who feels itself to be king of the family and the world with power unlimited. Just as reality intrudes upon the two-year-old’s fantasy of omnipotence so does reality intrude upon the fantastic unity of the couple who have fallen in love...One by one, gradually or suddenly, the ego boundaries snap back into place; gradually or suddenly, they fall out of love. Once again they are two separate individuals.”

[M. Scott Peck, *The Road Less Traveled*](#)

When reality intrudes upon the illusions of falling in love, the romantic partner, rather than being a Magical Other, is revealed as being human, all-too-human. Seen without rose colored glasses, their faults, flaws, rough edges, and bad habits grow apparent. The partner does not always make one happy, meet one’s needs, or fulfill one’s expectations; and so, in place of sustained infatuation and happiness, at times there are feelings of indifference, disappointment, and even disdain. These feelings are a normal component of long-term relationships, for as M. Scott Peck writes: “...*real love often occurs in a context in which the feeling of love is lacking, when we act lovingly despite the fact that we don’t feel loving.*” ([M. Scott Peck, *The Road Less Traveled*](#)) However, for individuals enthralled to the myth of romantic love, the conclusion of the honeymoon period, and the awareness of the widening gulf between their fantasy of who they want their partner to be, and who they really are, can be a troubling experience. Or as James Hollis writes:

“Why don’t you make me feel good about myself?” we ask, usually unconsciously but sometimes straight out. “Why don’t you meet my needs?”...What a disappointment, how unromantic – the Other was not put on earth to serve or take care of me, protect me from my life!”

[James Hollis, *The Eden Project: In Search of the Magical Other*](#)

Or as Hollis continues:

“...if I do not see and love my partner as a real person in the real world, if instead I elaborate a fantasy about him or her, using the person merely as a springboard for my imagination and my wishes, then I am doomed sooner or later to resent the actual person for not living up to my fantasies.”

[James Hollis, *The Eden Project: In Search of the Magical Other*](#)

So long as one remains captured by the myth of romantic love, and chained to search for the Magical Other, one dooms their relationships from the start. Holding onto the expectation that a romantic partner should be the primary source of life’s meaning leads to resentment and mounting pressures that either strain or break the relationship. A pathological dynamic can also develop. The individual in search of the Magical Other manipulates and controls their partner in the attempt to mold them into their idealized image; while the other partner, fearful that they will be abandoned, hopelessly strives to live up to this fantasy by submissively devoting almost all their time and energy to satiating the other’s every desire, wish, and need. Or as Hollis writes:

“[The search for the Magical Other] accounts for the fact that so many couples move from naive relatedness to the joustings of power. If you do not act as I wish, I shall bring about your compliance by my actions. I will control you, criticize you, abuse you, withdraw from you, sabotage you...And so, through tactics of dependence or anger or control, mixed with emotional and sexual withdrawal, one [of the partners] tries to force the Other back into one’s original, imaginary mold. Seldom are these attitudes and behaviors conscious.”

[*James Hollis, The Eden Project: In Search of the Magical Other*](#)

To avoid the unnecessary suffering that plagues so many relationships, it is critical that we discard the myth of romantic love, abandon the search for the Magical Other, and rather than seeking salvation in someone else’s affection, concentrate on cultivating self-love. For as the psychologist Nathaniel Branden wrote:

“The first love affair we must consummate successfully is the love affair with ourselves. Only then are we ready for other love relationships.”

[*Nathaniel Branden, The Psychology of Romantic Love*](#)

Or as M. Scott Peck observed:

“If being loved is your goal, you will fail to achieve it. The only way to be assured of being loved is to be a person worthy of love, and you cannot be a person worthy of love when your primary goal in life is to passively be loved.”

[*M. Scott Peck, The Road Less Traveled*](#)

One of the most effective ways to find the motivation to cultivate self-love is to recognize and accept the fact that we are, and always will be, inescapably alone. We are born alone, die alone, and though the boundaries which separate us from others can be bridged, they can never be transcended. “*We are each of us, in the last analysis, islands of consciousness—and that is the root of our aloneness.*”, observed James Hollis. Relationships come, and either through breakup, divorce, or death, they end, but what always remains is our individual journey – the magnum opus of our life.

“The ultimate goal of life remains the spiritual growth of the individual, the solitary journey to peaks that can be climbed only alone.”

[*M. Scott Peck, The Road Less Traveled*](#)

Focusing on expanding our skills, pursuing excellence in a vocation, cultivating enriching hobbies, sculpting our mind and body, creating a network of inspiring friends, seeking adventures, and devoting ourselves to rewarding goals – this is how we make our solitary journey meaningful, and therein cultivate self-love. And with sufficient self-love, we do not need a relationship to thrive, and, paradoxically, this is when we are at our most attractive and capable of cultivating a healthy relationship that is based on the following foundation of realism: A romantic partner can support us and enrich our journey, just as we can support and enrich theirs. However, to use a relationship to flee the burdens of our existence and to look to another person to provide us fulfillment, is to damage the relationship and cripple ourselves with infantile dependencies. The earthly salvation

that we seek can only be found by cultivating and affirming our individual journey; it cannot be found in the arms of another.

“Those vested deeply in the idea of romance will no doubt protest, but then they will remain enslaved to the pursuit of the illusory Magical Other.”

James Hollis, The Eden Project: In Search of the Magical Other

Or as M. Scott Peck concludes:

“...it is the separateness of the partners that enriches the union. Great marriages cannot be constructed by individuals who are terrified by their basic aloneness, as so commonly is the case, and seek a merging in marriage... Two people love each other only when they are quite capable of living without each other but choose to live with each other... Genuine love not only respects the individuality of the other but actually seeks to cultivate it, even at the risk of separation or loss.

M. Scott Peck, The Road Less Traveled